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Review: Nikon AF 135mm f/2D DC

Nikon AF 135mm f/2D DC Review

Nikon AF 135mm f/2D DC is one of the oldest autofocus lens that is still in production. It was originally released back in 1995. Apart from the monster AFS 200mm f/2 VR, this is longest f/2 lens currently made by Nikon and it was designed for 1 purpose only, the ultimate portrait lens! (at least for those of us that can't afford the US$4000+ 200 f/2)
It's the first "DC" lens and one of the only two ever made. DC means Defocus Control. Defocus Control was designed to allow user to fine tune the foreground/background defocusing (bokeh). How is it done?

To explain it, i need to tell a bit of story first.
One of the major thing when designing new lenses is the spherical aberration control. Spherical aberration is generally a bad thing as it makes the image not sharp. But sharpness is not the only thing we photographers concern about. One other very important thing that a lot of photographers care is how beautiful and smooth the out of focus area (bokeh) look like. If the spherical aberration is left a bit undercorrected, it will actually give a smooth background bokeh, which is usually more pleasant and is great for portraits. However at the same time not only the undercorrected spherical aberrration means the photo won't be as sharp, italso creates harsh foreground bokeh. So if foreground bokeh is a major component in your photo, and you want to make the foreground bokeh smooth and nice, you actually wants to have the spherical aberration a bit overcorrected. So normally the lens engineer need to find a balance and compromise between background bokeh/foreground bokeh/image sharpness. But what the Defocus Control does is to give the user the ability to adjust the spherical aberration to whatever suits the most. You want undercorrected or overcorrected spherical aberration ? Just turn the DC ring, or you can just make the lens like a normal lens by setting the DC value to zero. One thing I need to point out is that the Defocus lens is different from the normal softfocus lens. A soft focus lens doesn't have the foreground/background defocus control and basically just soften everything. While you can still make the DC lens to soften everything (by dial in a large amount of under or over corrected spherical aberration), Defocus control is mainly for you to fine tune and obtain the optimum foreground/background bokeh by moving some of the elements in the lens which controlls the spherical aberration.

Anyway, back to the 135DC, the 135DC is a "AF" lens, it requires camera with body AF motor for autofocusing. It's a pro quality lens with the old style Nikon pro lens finish. Build quality is just fantastic! Not like the newer generation lens which has that plastic-ky feel (look at my afs 50mm f/1.4G or even the more expensive afs 35mm f/1.4G), this lens is just pure **Metal-Solid-Gear**. Yes it's heavy and it's solid like a tank, with that old style crinkle finish on top.

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The lens has a built-in movable metal lens hood.
And i love it! You just pull it to extend it, and push it back when you don't need it. Unlike the reversible lens hood, it doesn't block any of the control ring/buttons even when it's in "storage position". And you don't need to worry about losing the lens hood. I personally thing it's a great design and of course million times better than the non reversible lens hood on my 85mm f/1.4D. Not sure why Nikon stop making lens hood like this. They really really should bring this design back.

Built-in lens hood in Storage Position

Built-in lens hood in Extended Position

Defocus Control Effect Sample Photos @ f/2

When DC is set to zero, the lens works like a normal lens.

DC = 0

When DC is set to R, the background bokeh becomes smoother. But foreground bokeh becomes more nervous. When DC value is larger than aperture number, the whole picture becomes softer as well.

R2

R2.8

R4

R 5.6

DC set to F. Notice the Foreground Bokeh is now smoother. But background bokeh become very nervous (almost reflex lens kind of bokeh)

F 2

F 2.8

F 4

F 5.6

F Max

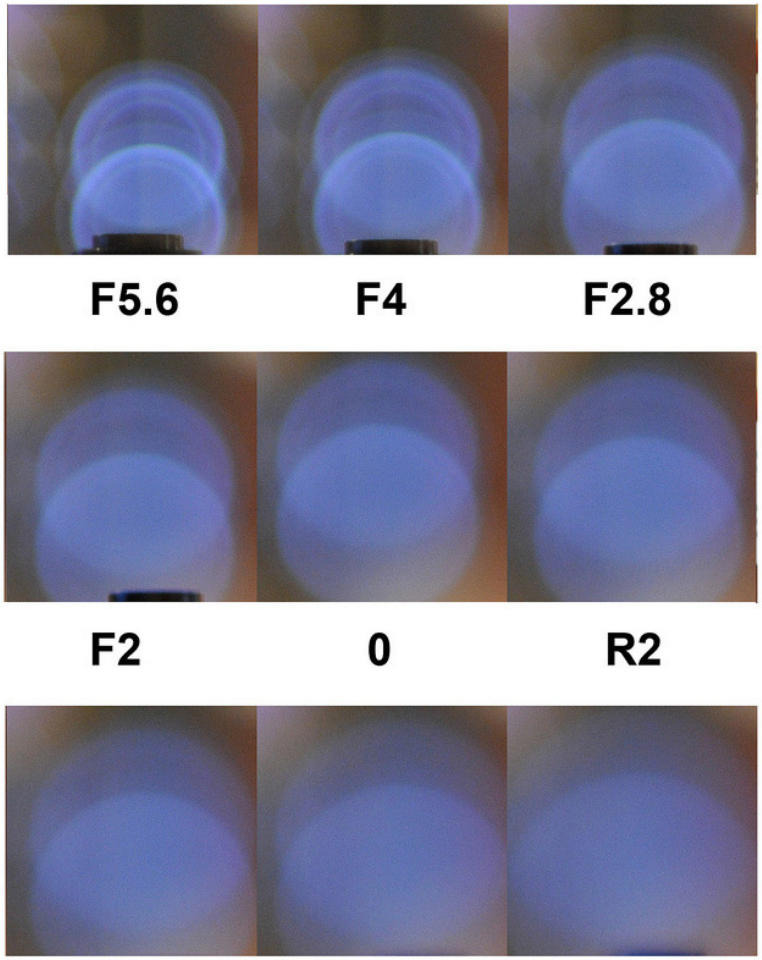
Defocus Control Comparison Photos @ f/2 - Close Up

Area A = focus point
Area B = Background Bokeh
Area C = Foreground Bokeh

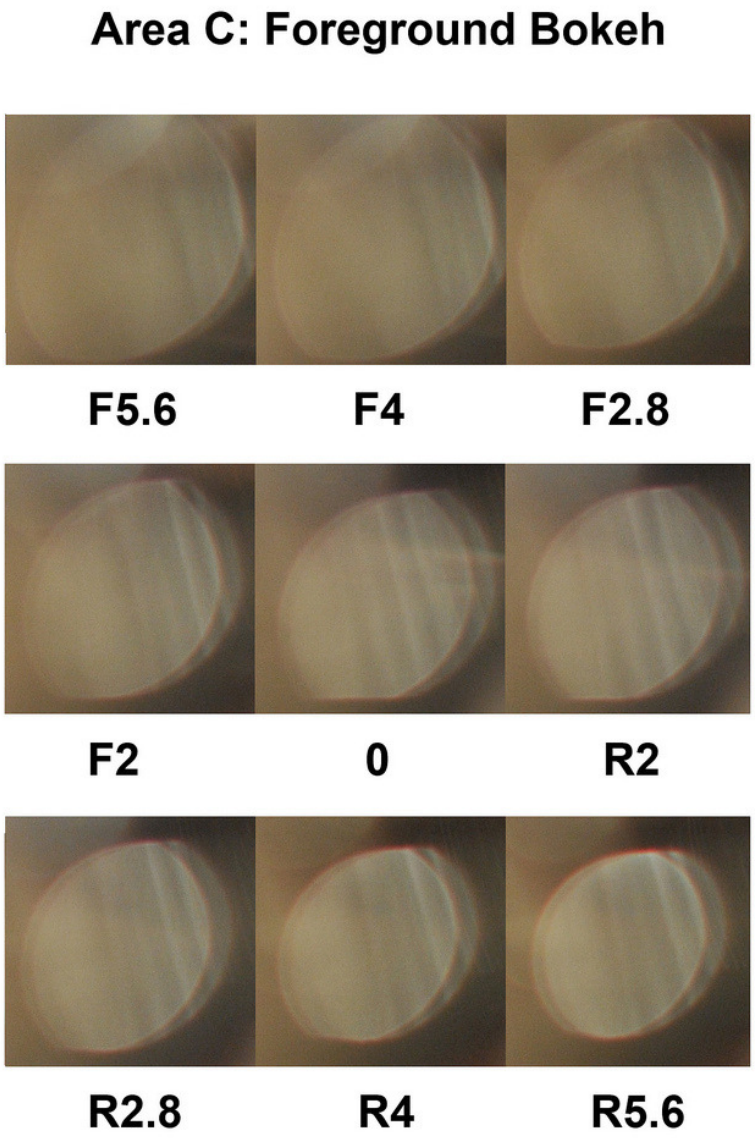
Area A: Focus Point

Area A Focus Point Comparison

Area B: Background Bokeh



Area B Background Bokeh Comparison



Area C Foreground Bokeh Comparison

Autofocus

It is the old style AF lens, so you need a body with body AF motor to enjoy autofocus. And it uses a mechnical A/M switch to switch between AF and MF. Unlike the newer AFS lenses, you can't just grab the focus ring and adjust the focus when it's in "A" (autofocus) mode. The AF speed is largely depend on the camera body. When mounted on my D700, the autofocus speed is reasonably fast. AF is a bit noisy just most other AF lens.

In my opinion, autofocus accuracy for a large aperture lens is more important than the autofocus speed. Lighting fast autofocus speed is no use if half the shot you took is out of focus. Before i buy the 135DC, i did quite a bit of research and read a lot of reviews/ discussions on various photography forums. It seems people are complaining about front/back focus problem when this lens is used on a DSLR (but no problem is used on a SLR) So i was a bit worried about this when i receive my lens. Fortunately I don't seem to have any front/back focusing problem with my lens. Even when DC ring is set to non zero, the autofocus still seem to work accurately. On the lens's user manual, it does say that if the DC ring is set to non zero, it's best to use manual focus instead. Reason is pretty simple. when DC is set to F or R and value is larger than the aperture value, it can soften up the image a lot and it makes it hard for the camera's autofocus system to get an accurate result.

Another thing i need to mention is that if you want to adjust the DC setting, you need to do it before focusing.

CA

One of the obvious problem with the 135DC is the purple fringing! It is really very obvious when you are shooting scenes with high contrast objects. Stop down helps a bit but you just can't do much if you are shooting a high contrast scene. This is actually a common problem for most of the large aperture lenses, the 85 1.4D, 50 1.4D both has this problem, even the new 35 1.4G and 85 1.4G has this problem.

Sample photos

Unedited JPG straight from camera.

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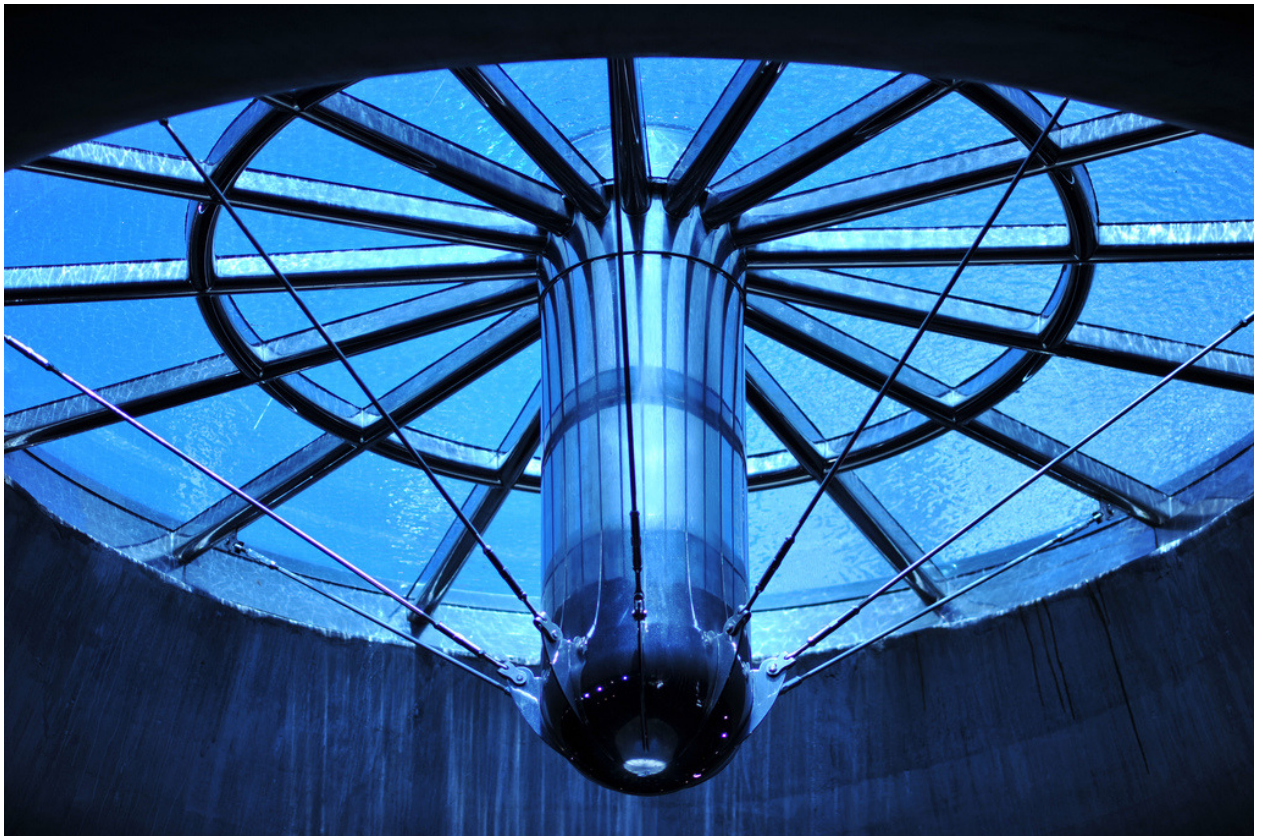

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